

Riparian Area Definition—A Viewpoint

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1985 logically can be called The Year of the Riparian because of the great amount of agency and public attention that came into focus on riparian areas. Management of riparian sites and the knotty problems associated with their rehabilitation are some of the most difficult resource problems to solve in a practical manner. Hopefully, the developing techniques for riparian management will fully recognize that the riparian area, per se, is often the most visible symptom of a sick watershed; its permanent healing is largely dependent upon management of the watershed.

It is reassuring that we have come full cycle during the past 40-50 years, after experiencing a prolonged emphasis on short-time production, and are back to where soil erosion and water quality and quantity are prime topics of agency and public concern. After all, water is the most precious commodity produced from our range and forest lands.

The definition of "riparian area" is basic to riparian management; we first have to agree on what riparian is before we can manage it. If we do not have a scientifically correct and practical definition, it will be difficult to obtain unanimity among the various interests concerned. The result could be that riparian area designation would be based on a variety of concepts which would likely vary from one interest group to another depending upon viewpoints. Riparian management and rehabilitation is difficult enough to achieve without being confounded by a controversy over what is or is not riparian.

The Society for Range Management and the Bureau of Land Management, to my knowledge, have tentatively defined riparian zones or areas. Other groups or agencies may have done likewise. This is such an important current issue that it behooves the Society membership to offer constructive suggestions for producing a scientifically correct and practical

definition that is acceptable as a common basis for designating riparian areas. For openers, I submit the following:

Society for Range Management definition contained in a statement of Findings regarding the Public Rangelands Policy Amendments Act of 1985.

Riparian zones or areas are the banks and adjacent areas of water bodies, water courses, seeps and springs whose waters provide soil moisture sufficiently in excess of that otherwise available locally so as to provide a more moist habitat than that of contiguous flood plains and uplands.

Bureau of Land Management definition contained in Draft Riparian Area Management Policy Statement.

Riparian areas are zones of transition from aquatic to terrestrial ecosystems, whose presence is dependent upon surface and/or subsurface water, and which reveal through their existing or potential soil-vegetation complex the influence of that water. Riparian areas may be associated with features such as lakes; reservoirs; estuaries; potholes; springs; bogs; wet meadows; muskegs; and ephemeral, intermittent, or perennial streams.

My suggested definition.

A riparian area is a distinct ecological site, or combination of sites, in which soil moisture is sufficiently in excess of that otherwise available locally, due to run-on and/or subsurface seepage, so as to result in an existing or potential soil-vegetation complex that depicts the influence of that extra soil moisture. Riparian areas may be associated with lakes; reservoirs; estuaries; potholes; springs; bogs; wet meadows; muskegs; and intermittent or perennial streams. The distinctive soil-vegetation complex is the differentiating criteria.

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